
Congressman Greg Walden's Oregon Congressional Connection

Your Direct Link to the News and Events in the Nation's Capital

Monday, July 1, 2002

Dear Fellow Oregonian:

In this week's Oregon Congressional Connection I've included some of the news from Capitol Hill that's taken place since I last emailed you, including the House passage of an affordable, voluntary prescription drug benefit under Medicare. There's also an update on a tremendous success we've had in securing funding to keep the Medford Air Tanker Base open. Additionally, I've included information on a hearing to be held July 16 concerning legislation I've introduced to spur economic development and reduce traffic congestion in central Oregon.

With Congress out of session during the 4th of July district work period, no committee hearings or legislative action is scheduled for this week. As always, you can find additional information about developments in Congress on my web site at www.walden.house.gov, which I've just updated.

If you have any questions or comments about this e-newsletter or anything else taking place in Congress and our nation's capital, please e-mail me at greg.walden@mail.house.gov. My staff and I will get back to you as quickly as possible.

I hope you find this week's Oregon Congressional Connection informative. Thank you.

God Bless America.

Congressman Greg Walden

In This Week's Edition

- District Wrap-Up
- News from Capitol Hill
- On the Horizon

- Committee Hearings
- On the House Floor
- Second District trivia

District Wrap-Up

Today I'm spending the day away from the nation's capital visiting central Oregon and meeting with many of the people I have the honor of representing in Congress. I've listed my schedule for the day below.

SISTERS

8:45 AM to 9:45 AM – I attended a coffee hosted by the Sisters Chamber of Commerce, where I delivered an update on a measure I introduced in Congress to spur economic development and reduce traffic congestion in central Oregon (scroll down to learn more about this measure), legislation to enhance corporate accountability standards, and a recently passed prescription drug benefit for seniors under Medicare (see below), as well as recent developments in Congress relating to small businesses.

BEND

10:45 AM to 11:45 AM – I met with local irrigation district managers and the Deschutes Resources Conservancy (DRC) to celebrate additional flows to the Deschutes River Basin and discuss the successful Annual Water Leasing Program. I've helped secure federal funding for the Deschutes Resources Conservancy and am pursuing additional funds this year. Joining me were Ron Nelson, DRC Board Chair; Gail Achterman, DRC Director; Kyle Gorman, Water Resources Department; Elmer McDaniels, Tumalo Irrigation District; Todd Griffiths, Swalley Irrigation District; and Marc Thalacker, Squaw Creek Irrigation District.

12:00 PM to 1:15 PM – I spoke at the weekly meeting of the Bend Kiwanis Club, which also hosted members of the Redmond, Sisters, Bend, Prineville, and Madras Kiwanis clubs. I delivered an update on developments in Congress of interest to Kiwanis members, including health care, economic development, and education funding.

2:45 to 3:30 PM – I met with members of the executive team of Ida Tech, a fuel processing technology and fuel cell systems development corporation, where I was given an overview of the company's operations and a tour of the Ida Tech facility. I've requested federal funds to develop fuel cell power systems for building applications and strongly support the development of renewable sources of energy. Joining me were Kurt Stelk, Vice President for Finance; Michael Otterbach, Vice President for Operations; and Diana Catt, Human Resources Manager.

3:45 PM to 4:30 PM – I met with Deschutes County Commissioners Dennis Luke, Mike Daley, and Tom DeWolf to discuss issues of importance to Deschutes County. Also in

attendance were George Read, Deschutes County Community Development Director, and Tom Blust, Director of the Deschutes County Road Department. During the meeting I gave a status update on my central Oregon economic development legislation, as well as other federal transportation issues relating to Deschutes County.

News from Capitol Hill

House passes new prescription drug benefit for seniors under Medicare

On June 28, after a debate that lasted well into the early morning hours, the House passed a measure to provide a voluntary, affordable prescription drug program for seniors under Medicare. The Medicare Modernization and Prescription Drug Act of 2002 (H.R. 4954), which I strongly supported, passed by a vote of 221 to 208.

Health security is one of the cornerstones of a secure retirement. While prescription drugs have helped millions of senior citizens improve their quality of life, the cost of these cutting-edge, life-saving medicines has skyrocketed, putting a particular pinch on those living on a fixed-income.

The bottom line is that no senior should be forced to choose between buying food and paying for prescription drugs. That's why I've fought hard since coming to Congress to enact a prescription drug plan for seniors under Medicare. I voted for such a plan two years ago that passed the House, but was never approved by the Senate.

The plan I supported last week will not only help seniors afford their medications, but will help strengthen Medicare, a program that I strongly support. This latest proposal will also improve home health care, community hospitals and access to local physicians.

This winter and spring I visited with seniors, hospital boards, doctors, nurses, home health care providers, nursing home residents and others from La Grande and Ontario to Medford, Grants Pass and John Day. Everywhere I went I heard the message loud and clear: we need help to make sure people get the medical care they need. I'm pleased to report that this legislation goes a long way toward answering these calls.

The prescription drug proposal we passed addresses four important goals:

- 1) Lowering the costs of prescription drugs
- 2) Guaranteeing that ALL seniors have access to prescription drug coverage
- 3) Improving and strengthening Medicare with increased choices and savings
- 4) Strengthening Medicare for future generations

According to a Department of Health and Human Services study, this plan will provide real relief for seniors and disabled Americans: those who pay full retail prices would typically see the costs of each prescription cut by 60 percent or more.

Under this new plan, the prescription drug benefit is optional. Since many seniors in America already have plans that cover their drugs, it doesn't make sense to force them into a plan they don't need nor want. However, all seniors on Medicare would be guaranteed access to at least two new prescription drug plans.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the premium would be about \$33 a month. There would be a \$250 deductible and then the plan would pay 80% of the amount between \$251 and \$1,000 and 50% of the amount between \$1,001 and \$2,000. The average senior's drug costs this year are estimated at \$2,150, and two-thirds of seniors pay less than \$2,000 per year. No senior would pay more than \$3,700 in out-of-pocket drug expenses, a provision that would prevent a catastrophic loss.

Just as importantly, however, the plan really helps those most in need. For seniors with incomes up to 150% of the poverty level, the entire premium and deductible are covered, and cost sharing is capped at \$5 per prescription. That means people who earn up to about \$15,000 per year would pay next to nothing for their prescription drugs under this plan. The subsidy phases out at 175% of the poverty level. And unlike some proposals, this plan is paid for within the country's budget.

In short, the plan is affordable and responsible. It targets the most assistance to those most in need. It gives seniors the choice to keep the plan they have or choose between two competing plans. And it guarantees lower-priced drugs right off the bat.

Is it everything everyone would like? No. But too many seniors in Oregon and across the United States can't wait for the "perfect" plan. They've waited too long already.

Before this measure can become law, it will require the approval of both the U.S. Senate and the President. I'm hopeful that the plan will pass quickly so we can get seniors the help they deserve. In the meantime, I will continue to do all I can to protect and strengthen Medicare and fight for a prescription drug benefit.

Federal funding for Medford Air Tanker Base

Last week a U.S. House subcommittee gave its approval to the \$1.2 million that the U.S. Forest Service says it needs to upgrade the Medford Air Tanker Base. I requested this funding back in January after the Forest Service said that without the upgrade they would close the tanker base, which is vital to the protection of lives and property in southern Oregon. The full House Appropriations Committee is expected to approve the funding recommended by the Subcommittee on the Interior in mid-July before sending the measure to the House for consideration.

Maintaining the operations of the Medford base is critical to ensuring the safety of Oregonians in the Second District, and I firmly believe that whatever costs would be saved by shutting the base down would not be worth the danger posed to the community by wildfire. My staff and I met with county, state and federal officials on numerous

occasions in Oregon and Washington, D.C. over the past year to press the Forest Service to keep the Medford base open and fully operational. My goal is to ensure that we have no loss of protection in southern Oregon.

The decision by the Forest Service to close the Medford Air Tanker Base was made in spite of its own studies that concluded that the most efficient way to fight fire in southern Oregon is to continue to operate bases both in Medford and Klamath Falls. As we saw with the Quartz Fire last summer, it's better to be able to attack a fire quickly to prevent it from destroying our watershed, our environment and our homes.

As you may recall, the Quartz Fire burned over 6,000 acres of federal, state and private land in Oregon. It was initially predicted to spread to 28,000 acres, but the fire was contained in large part due to the close proximity of the Medford tanker base. This resulted in a savings of more than \$28.8 million in fire suppression costs. While this year's fire season in Oregon has not yet reached its peak, 330 wildfires have already occurred in Oregon this year, which have destroyed more than 4,300 acres of forest. Retaining this base will preserve that 'initial attack' capability and I believe will save the taxpayer tens of millions of dollars in the long run. This is a real victory for the residents of southern Oregon.

Commitments of local financial support from Jackson, Josephine, Douglas, Curry and Coos counties to help cover the operational costs of the base were a critical factor in securing the federal funds. The federal funding simply would not have materialized had it not been for the support of community leaders like the Jackson County Commissioners, officials with the Jackson County Airport Authority and the Oregon Department of Forestry, as well as Sen. Gordon Smith, Sen. Ron Wyden, and Congressman Peter DeFazio. This success just goes to show what we can accomplish for our communities when we build a strong local, state and federal partnership.

While this appropriations bill still must be passed by the full House and Senate, I'm confident that this funding will remain a part of the bill and will eventually make its way to Medford.

U.S. Transportation Department Grant to Baker City For Improved Air Service

On June 26, the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that Baker City will receive a \$300,000 federal grant as part of a program designed to assist smaller communities in developing their airline service. The Baker City grant, which will be used in support of the city's first air service by Sky Taxi, is one of 40 being awarded to small communities in 38 states under the Small Community Air Service Development Pilot Program. Congress has appropriated a total of \$20 million for the new program. Baker City will provide \$511,000 in cost sharing for the air service project.

This funding will improve the ability of local residents to access larger transportation hubs around the state and region, and I'm hopeful that it will serve as an added incentive

to attract new businesses and jobs to the area. Many of the communities in eastern Oregon never enjoyed the economic boom of the 1990s, and it's this sort of federal investment that is necessary to spur the economic development that so many of our rural communities desperately need.

The grant program that will provide the funds to Baker City has its origins in the Wendell H. Ford Aviation Investment and Reform Act for the 21st Century, which was signed into law by the President on April 5, 2000. The new law established a pilot program designed to assist smaller communities in enhancing their air service. Grant applications were received from 179 communities nationwide for the first \$20 million Congress appropriated for the program. While Baker City was the only Oregon community to receive funds under the new program, we have other airports in the Second District that would also benefit from this program, and I'll continue to support their requests for assistance.

9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling on constitutionality of the Pledge of Allegiance

Like the vast majority of Americans, I was absolutely appalled by the 9th Circuit Court ruling that reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag is unconstitutional. It's hard to imagine how a room full of school children expressing their love for our country threatens to trample on the religious rights of the American people. This decision represents judicial activism at its worst, and no court has a more shameful history of that practice than the 9th Circuit Court. This past term, the Supreme Court reviewed 29 cases from the 9th Circuit and overturned 28 of them. It's not hard to understand why.

The day after the ruling, I joined an overwhelming majority of my House colleagues in passing a resolution expressing our outrage over the judges' decision. Needless to say, this ruling united the American people like few issues in recent memory. While the judge who authored the ruling later stayed his decision until the appeals court has a chance to review the outcome of the case, it's clear that the values of these judges are not consistent with the values of the people of Oregon.

Long before this latest misguided ruling, I cosponsored a bill in Congress that would remove Oregon from the 9th Circuit Court. This measure – the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals Reorganization Act of 2001 (HR 1203) – would divide the 9th Circuit into two new circuits. Arizona, California, and Nevada would remain in the existing 9th Circuit, while Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, and the Northern Mariana Islands would form a new 12th Circuit Court. I'm hopeful this ridiculous decision will provide the fuel to get this bill passed in the House and Senate and signed into law by the President. I'll be sure to keep you updated on our progress in rescuing the good people of Oregon from the jurisdiction of these judge s.

On the Horizon

Mid-Columbia Veterans Memorial

On the 4th of July I'll join community leaders and residents of The Dalles in dedicating the Mid-Columbia Veterans Memorial, which was conceived by local citizens to pay tribute to the sons and daughters of Oregon's Mid-Columbia region who have served our nation in times of war.

Building on an existing memorial to local veterans of the Vietnam War, community leaders launched this effort to create a lasting monument to every veteran of the Mid-Columbia from the Spanish-American War to the current War on Terrorism. A central feature of the Mid-Columbia Veterans Memorial is a tribute to Korean War veteran Loren Kaufman, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for extraordinary heroism in action against a numerically superior foe.

This memorial was built from funds gathered from the State of Oregon, the federal government, local businesses and private citizens. Last year I was successful in securing \$120,000 in federal funds in the Fiscal Year 2002 Veterans Affairs / Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Act for the memorial, and I have strongly supported the effort to make the idea behind this memorial a reality.

More than 1,000 people are expected to attend the dedication on Thursday. I look forward to participating in this event and joining with my fellow Oregonians in honoring the men and women who have guarded the freedom that we are so fortunate to enjoy.

Right-of-way to West Butte Road

The House Resources Subcommittee on Parks and Public Lands is scheduled to hold a legislative hearing on July 16 to examine a measure I introduced to spur economic development in central Oregon and ease traffic congestion along Highway 97.

My bill, H.R. 4953, would allow the City of Prineville to build a paved connection to Highway 20 by granting to Deschutes and Crook counties the right-of-way to West Butte Road, which is controlled by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In return for control of the road, the counties would be required to transfer the right-of-way to George Millican Road to the BLM. This bill is a companion measure to legislation introduced in the U.S. Senate by Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR).

I'm extremely pleased that the Resources Committee has agreed to hold a hearing on this important piece of legislation, and I look forward to making the case for its passage to my colleagues on the Committee. This measure has a great deal of potential to improve Prineville's economy, as well as address the transportation and infrastructure needs of central Oregon. Developing a paved connection to Highway 20 will steer traffic through Prineville's industrial district, which I'm hopeful will attract businesses and jobs to the community. The bill has the added benefit of reducing traffic congestion along Highway

97, which will benefit residents of Deschutes County and companies that truck goods along the Bend-Redmond corridor.

Because only a few mark-up sessions remain during the current session of Congress, I asked Resources Committee Chairman James Hansen for an expedited hearing to consider H.R. 4953. I'm pleased that he agreed to hold the hearing, and I look forward to getting this bill to the House floor for a vote as quickly as possible.

The hearing is scheduled for 11:00 AM (PST) on July 16. To listen to the hearing live, visit the following link: <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov/audio.htm>.

Second District Trivia

This week's question: What eastern Oregon lawmaker served in the House of Representatives from 1957 to 1980, ending his career as Chairman of the powerful Committee on Ways and Means?

Bonus question: Under what circumstances did his service in Congress come to an end? Who replaced him?

For the answer to this question and to take a crack at past questions, click here: <http://www.walden.house.gov/trivia/trivia.htm>

For more information on these and other issues, please visit my website at www.walden.house.gov or call my Washington, D.C., office at (202) 225-6730. You can also call my Medford office toll-free at (800) 533-3033. If you have any questions or comments, please send them to dallas.boyd@mail.house.gov. If you'd like to be removed from the "Oregon Congressional Connection" list simply send an email to newsletter-request@or02list.house.gov and type UNSUBSCRIBE in the subject line.